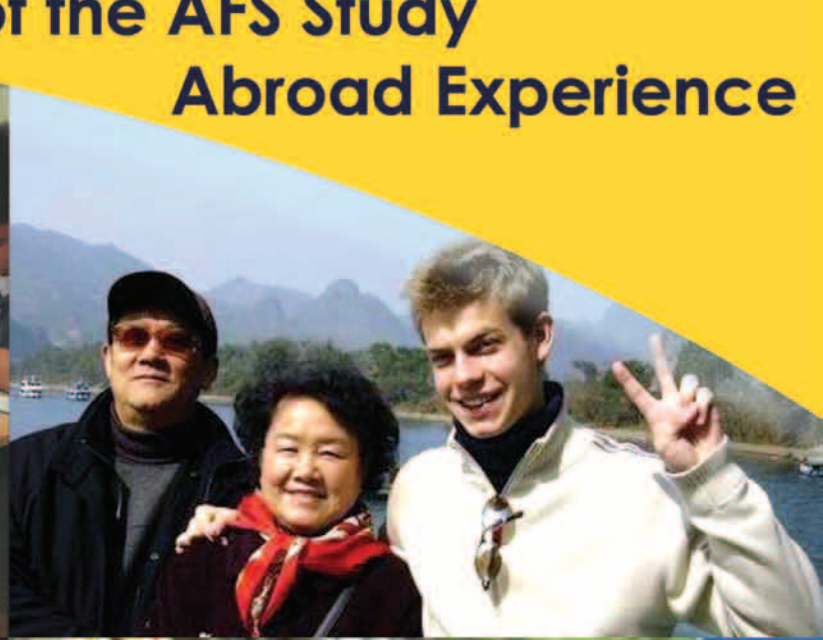


# Assessment of the Impact of the AFS Study Abroad Experience



## Executive Summary: Overall Findings

An Independent Research Study Designed and Conducted by



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# Executive Summary: Overall Findings

## Background and Research Design

AFS International, under the leadership of Mr. Paul Shay, contracted with Dr. Mitchell Hammer of Hammer Consulting, LLC to design and conduct an independent assessment of the impact of the AFS study abroad experience offered to high school students throughout the world. The specific study abroad program examined was the 10-month, host family experience that took place between September, 2002 to July, 2003.

A rigorous, pre test, post test, and post-post test, control group design was used to scientifically assess the impact of the AFS study abroad experience on AFS students. This design enabled assessment of the impact of the AFS (study abroad) experience on AFS students compared to students who did not participate in the study abroad program. Further, the study design enabled analysis of the impact of the AFS experience over time (post test to post-post test measures).

Data was gathered using three different groups of respondents. First, some of the questionnaires were completed by the AFS students and control group members (self-report measures). Second, questionnaires were completed by the AFS student's own family (sending family ratings). Third, surveys were completed by the AFS student's host family. Therefore, measures were obtained from three distinct perspectives, with some of the data coming from self-report measures, data obtained from the students own parents and data obtained in-country from the student's host family. All the measures used in the study had cross-cultural validity testing and were reliably used in this study. In addition, selected AFS students participated in a "critical incident" electronic journal (e-journal), qualitative data gathering process, in which four stimulus questions were asked of the AFS students at four different times during their study abroad program. A post study interview

protocol was designed, to be implemented upon the completion of this report.

## Goals of the Study

The research study had six core goals:

- ◆ Provide empirical findings concerning the effects of the AFS educational experience that will centrally locate AFS International as a leader in intercultural education.
- ◆ Increase the identity and visibility of AFS Intercultural Programs, Inc. compared to other international exchange organizations.
- ◆ Increase the competitive advantage of AFS Intercultural Programs, Inc. compared to other international exchange organizations.
- ◆ Help unify the various country programs and partner organizations by documenting the underlying outcomes of the AFS experience.
- ◆ Provide the organization with a culturally generalizable framework for understanding and increasing member and student intercultural competence.
- ◆ Provide an initial benchmark of intercultural competence for various AFS programs.

The study examined the impact of the AFS study abroad experience in:

1. The development of intercultural competence.
2. Lessening of intercultural anxiety when interacting with people from other cultures.
3. Increasing knowledge of the host country.



4. Increasing foreign language proficiency.
5. Increasing interaction with people from other cultures.
6. Increasing number of friendships developed with people from other cultures.
7. Increasing overall intercultural effectiveness.
8. Increasing ability to demonstrate AFS intercultural values.
9. Satisfaction with the study abroad experience.

The overall research objectives of the study were to examine the impact over time of the AFS study abroad experience on AFS students compared to students who did not go overseas (control group) and to compare each of the participating countries.

### **Intercultural Competence: A Core Focus of the Study**

An innovative and comprehensive model of intercultural competence (The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, DMIS) along with a sophisticated, cross-culturally validated assessment tool for assessing intercultural competence, The Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), provided the core conceptual framework and research instrument used in the study.<sup>1</sup>

The DMIS as developed by Dr. Milton Bennett identifies a number of core “worldviews”

through which individuals experience “cultural difference”.

Intercultural competence is the capacity to generate perceptions and adapt behavior to cultural context. As one’s experience of cultural difference becomes more complex, one’s intercultural competence is enhanced. There are a set of “worldviews” that orient individuals toward more or less complex experiences of cultural difference. These worldviews include more *Ethnocentric* (termed Denial/Defense and Reversal) orientations, a more *Tolerance* or *Transitional* perspective (termed Minimization), and more a *Ethnorelative* orientation (termed Acceptance/Adaptation). The Ethnocentric orientations *polarize* cultural difference, either by avoiding or denigrating other cultures (DD, Denial/Defense orientation) or a Reversal worldview where other cultures are viewed as superior and one denigrates one’s own culture (R orientation). A “*tolerance*” or “*transitional*” orientation highlights cultural commonality and universal values while *Minimizing* cultural difference (M orientation). The more culturally sensitive, Ethnorelative worldview is able to recognize and comprehend cultural differences and to *adapt* behavior and perception according to cultural context (AA orientation). In addition, an “*Encapsulated Marginality*” (EM) worldview, as assessed by the IDI, focuses on the degree to which an individual experiences a sense of *cultural marginality* characterized by feelings of disconnection and alienation from specific cultural communities. The Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) is a psychometrically validated measure of intercultural competence that measures these orientations.

<sup>1</sup> for additional information on the DMIS and the development of the IDI, see: Hammer, M.R., Bennett, M.J. & Wiseman, R. (2003). The Intercultural Development Inventory: A measure of intercultural sensitivity. In M. Paige (Guest Editor), *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 27, 421-443 and Bennett, M.J. (1993). Towards ethnorelativism: A developmental model of intercultural sensitivity. In R. M. Paige (Ed.), *Education for the intercultural experience* (pp. 21-71). Yarmouth: ME: Intercultural Press.

## Overall Findings of the Study

The major findings from the study clearly support the impact of AFS study abroad. These impacts are stable, that is, they are impacts that remain with the student after they return home. Further, these impacts are not found in the ordinary educational experience of secondary students in their home countries. These impacts are found specifically with students who begin the program in the more “Ethnocentric” stage (DD/R) and that the AFS study abroad experience has little impact on any of the measures used in the study for those students who begin the program in the more interculturally developed stage of Minimization. Analysis of those students who started the program in the more Ethnorelative orientation of Acceptance/Adaptation could not be undertaken as there were not a sufficient number of students in these orientations.

If we look at the overall findings, AFS students, compared to the “best friend” (control group), had significantly:

- ◆ **Increased intercultural competence**
- ◆ **Increased knowledge of the host culture**
- ◆ **Increased fluency in the language of the host country**
- ◆ **Less anxiety in interacting with people from different cultures**
- ◆ **Increased friendships with people from other cultures**
- ◆ **Greater intercultural networks**

For the AFS students, their overall intercultural competence (DS score) was 88, placing their overall level of intercultural competence at the beginning of Minimization (M). The exchangees are not experiencing—as a group—significant Denial/Defense (DD) issues, in which they experience cultural differences in the host country through the lens of polarization, where they view their own home culture as superior to the host culture.

The AFS students are experiencing, however, significant “trailing” issues around Reversal (R) in which they are “in transition”, indicating a tendency for the group to be uncritical toward their host culture and more critical toward their home culture. They are experiencing cultural differences, however, from a polarizing orientation in which the host culture is viewed as superior to their own culture. This pattern, however, is not the primary orientation they are operating within. Rather, their primary orientation, as evidenced by their DS score, is the beginning stage of Minimization. In Minimization, the AFS students are experiencing significant issues in both the Similarity cluster and the Universalism cluster, indicating that they view cultural differences largely from the lens of human and value similarities and may likely ignore culture differences that cannot be subsumed under the “similarity” orientation. In short, they are largely discovering how cultures and peoples in the world are similar rather than probing more deeply into more fundamental cultural differences in family interaction patterns, communication and cultural values. Further, the AFS students are not engaging in deeper cultural adaptation while living in the host culture. The AFS students are not experiencing difficulties concerning their cultural identity as they do not have confused cultural perspectives or alienation around their cultural identification.

The Developmental Score (DS) of the Control group at the beginning of the study was 83, placing them right at the end of DD/R (Polarization) and at the cusp of Minimization. As a group, they experienced cultural differences in terms of trailing issues in Reversal with their predominant competence level located at the cusp of Minimization, a place where they are not questioning the limitations of their orientation that emphasizes commonality and similarity, often at the expense of recognizing deeper patterns of culture difference. Their level of intercultural competence did not change at all, as their post test and post-post test DS remained the same.

The Developmental Score (DS) in the post test for the AFS students is 90, maintaining their overall level of intercultural competence at the beginning of Minimization (M).

The AFS students as a group improved their overall DS score by 2 points. However, they have largely remained, at the conclusion of their study abroad program, with trailing issues in Reversal with their predominant competence level located at the beginning of Minimization, a place where they are not questioning the limitations of their orientation that emphasizes commonality and similarity, often at the expense of recognizing deeper patterns of culture difference.

After returning home from their study abroad program, The Developmental Score (DS) in the post-post test for the AFS students remained at 90, maintaining their overall level of intercultural competence at the beginning of Minimization (M). Overall, the AFS students maintained their post test improvement over time, that is, in the post-post test. However, they have largely remained, at the conclusion upon returning home, with trailing issues in Reversal with their predominant competence level located at the beginning of Minimization.

Additional analysis of the intercultural competence patterns of the AFS students was undertaken. Essentially, comparisons were made between students who, at the beginning of the program, were at the “Ethnocentric” (DD/R) developmental level compared to students at the “Tolerance” (M) level and students at the “Ethnorelative (AA) levels. The overall result is that the AFS program has a significant impact with students that begin the program in more Ethnocentric (less interculturally competent) stages and has little impact on students who begin the program in the more developed stage of Minimization. That is, the AFS student group that was more interculturally developed (M group) did not increase their intercultural competence by the conclusion of the program. In contrast, the more Ethnocentric group (DD/R group) improved their intercultural competence substantially (8 points, ½

a standard deviation) and moved from a DD/R orientation to the beginning of an M orientation at the post test. This movement in intercultural competence also is reflected in prior differences in most of the other pre test measures (knowledge of the host culture, anxiety, intercultural friendships, etc) disappearing at the completion of the study abroad program. Essentially, the DD/R group “caught up” with the M group on all measures at the completion of the program. These results were maintained six months later (post-post test).

Additional findings focus on whether there is a negative effect on the AFS students experience if they live with more than one host family. Overall results indicate that after returning home, there are no differences in intercultural competence, intercultural anxiety, etc. between students who lived with one host family compared to students who lived with multiple host families. Thus, while changing families may be administratively difficult, in terms of the overall experience the AFS student ultimately has, it is very similar whether one remains with one family or has more than one host family.

Additional analysis was conducted examining differences between countries. Overall results indicate that:

- ◆ AFS students vary considerably in their intercultural competence upon the start of the program by country. They also vary in their attained level of intercultural competence at the conclusion of the program.
- ◆ Substantial differences in host language preparation (pre test) exist among the countries, with students from some countries much more fluent in the host language at the start of the program compared to students from other countries. Further, AFS students vary by country in terms of the gains they achieve in host language fluency by the end of the program.
- ◆ Significant differences in the reduction of intercultural anxiety occurred for students

from some countries at the conclusion of the program, but not for students from other countries.

- ◆ There are substantial differences among the countries at the start of the program and upon return in intercultural networks and intercultural friendships. Students from some countries showed very strong increases while students from other countries remained largely the same upon return home.
- ◆ Significant differences among the countries exist in both parents and host family ratings of the AFS students' intercultural effectiveness and demonstration of AFS values, with students from some countries rated much higher than students from other countries.
- ◆ No differences were found at the conclusion of the program among the countries in either AFS students' knowledge of the host culture or their overall satisfaction (which was uniformly high) with the AFS program.

#### How important is this study?

**Very important.** The research is the most comprehensive study of secondary student study abroad experiences in 25 years, with the last major study of this magnitude conducted by AFS in 1981. Results from this study will have a direct impact on marketing efforts and internal organizational development efforts within the AFS network. In addition, the various publications undertaken by Dr. Hammer will provide international exposure to this assessment of the AFS experience.

#### Are the results valid? How confident can we be in the findings?

**Very confident.** The research used a rigorous, scientific design with cross-culturally valid and reliable measures such that AFS can firmly believe the findings from the study. The study will become a benchmark for such efforts for many years to come.

#### How effective is the AFS program?

**Very effective.** The AFS study abroad program of 10 months is remarkably effective across a number of important benchmarks. Intercultural competence is improved, knowledge of the host culture increases, intercultural anxiety decreases, cross-cultural networks expand, friendships increase upon return home, and strong gains in host language fluency result. These results are directly due to the AFS program, as similar gains did not result if students remained at home. Deeper examination of the features common to the AFS experience across countries should be undertaken as it is likely that other organizations will look to AFS as a "model" for effective, international educational exchange.

#### IS the AFS program equally effective with all students?

**No.** The AFS program has its primary impact on those students who are less interculturally developed, that is, those students who enter the program with more polarized (Reversal) orientations. The program does not have an impact on students who are more interculturally competent at the "Tolerance" or Minimization level. Deeper examination within AFS of why this is the case should be undertaken. Particular focus should be directed at the level of intercultural competence possessed by the host families themselves, as they represent the major element for the development of intercultural competence for the AFS students.

#### Do students from different countries have essentially the same AFS experience?

**No.** Substantial differences among students from different countries exist on almost all of the measures used in the study. Deeper investigation within AFS should be undertaken to identify elements among the countries that may explain these differences. Particular attention should be directed toward selection processes both for the AFS students as well as the host families within each country.

## About the Researcher

Dr. Mitchell R. Hammer is the President of Hammer Consulting, LLC, an intercultural conflict and crisis resolution firm, and professor of international peace and conflict resolution in the School of International Service at the American University in Washington D.C. Mitch provides advisement and training in the areas of intercultural communications, crisis and conflict negotiation, mediation to private corporations, not-for-profit organizations and law enforcement agencies. He has published widely, with over 50 articles in various academic and professional books and journals. His book *Dynamic Processes of Crisis Negotiation* was honored with the "Outstanding Book Award for 1997" by the International Association of Conflict Management. In addition to co-developing (with Milton Bennett) the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) and the S.A.F.E. model of crisis negotiation, he developed the Intercultural Conflict Style (ICS) Inventory.

## How this Research was Conducted

This three-year independent study represents one of the most comprehensive, scientifically grounded investigations of the impact of international education exchange on high school students. The research was designed and conducted by Mitchell R. Hammer, Ph.D., an expert in intercultural communication. A total of 2,100 students participated. Of these, 1,500 were AFS exchange students who lived with a host family and studied in another country for 10 months and 600 were "student friends" comprising a control group.

Data was collected before the students left for study abroad, immediately following the 10-month AFS program, and six months after they returned home. Responses were gathered from the student participants, their own parents, their host families, and from the control group.

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